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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the findings of a United Kingdom study that examined the impact of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) on a group of parents whose children would be most affected by the changes. Between the fall of 1989 and the summer of 1992, five rounds of interviews were conducted with the same sample of 138 parents from 11 different primary schools in a local education agency (LEA) in southwestern England. At the beginning of the study, over 80 percent of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their children's schools and felt that teachers were doing a good job. They also did not see themselves as consumers with regard to their children's education. Although they became more familiar with the concept over time, they did not enthusiastically embrace the role. When choosing schools, they were more concerned with the schools' social attributes than with its academic results. Initially, parents felt that standardized assessment would give them more information about their children's progress even though very few understood how it would be carried out. However, by 1992, many parents said that the process was too time-consuming and disruptive to classroom activities. In conclusion, parents' attitudes concerning their children's education have not been dramatically changed by the implementation of the ERA, nor did they wholeheartedly welcome the new legislation. (LMI)

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Paper prepared for American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
New Orleans, April 1994

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Abstract

The paper discusses the findings of a piece of research in England set up to look at the impact of the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) on a group of parents whose children who would be most affected by the changes it introduced. Many of these changes were implemented in the name of parents and the 1988 Act was seen by many to be the realisation of an age of parent power begun by earlier Acts (e.g. those of 1980 and 1986). Much of the debate in the British parliament, as the bill worked its way to becoming law, was about school accountability and parental desire for information. The research discussed in this paper looked at the legislation from the parents' perspective. It asked how they regarded the changes and how the new law was affecting them and their relationship with their children's schools. Although the title Education Reform Act implies a need for change the study found very little evidence of real concern amongst parents. At the beginning of the research over 80% were satisfied, or very satisfied, with their children's schools and felt that the teachers were doing a good job. The researchers also asked parents whether they saw themselves as consumers with regard to their children's education, a role being defined for them by the government. In the first year (Hughes, Wikeley and Nash 1990) a large number found it a puzzling concept to be applied to education and although they became more familiar with the idea over time it was still not a role that they took on enthusiastically. When choosing schools they were more concerned with the social attributes of the school than with its academic results as portrayed by the government produced 'league tables'. Perhaps the most explicit change implemented by 1988 Act was the introduction of the National Curriculum and accompanying standardised assessment. The parents' knowledge of the National Curriculum increased over time but they still felt ill informed about what it would involve as their children progressed up the school, but they liked the idea of English, Maths and Science forming the core curriculum. However their feelings about standardised assessment changed over the research period. Initially they felt it would give them more information about their children's progress even though very few felt they knew how it was going to be carried out but by 1992 many parents had changed their opinion. They felt that it had taken too long and the standard assessment tasks (SATs) had disrupted the class, wasting teaching time by exerting too much pressure on the teacher, although very few felt that it had put any undue pressure on their child.

There was no indication from the study that these parents' attitudes to their children's education had been dramatically changed by the implementation of the Education Reform Act, but it remains to be seen how it affects their long term relationship with their children's schools. Although the changes were introduced in their name this research shows that the new legislation has not been something that parents have welcomed wholeheartedly.

Introduction

In the past parents had often been regarded as problems by teachers who had seen their job as one of compensation for the shortcomings of the parents. More recently there has been a move to seeing parents in terms of partners who could be extremely influential on their children's academic achievement if persuaded to work with the teachers (Docking 1990). The ERA was one of several Education

Acts introduced by the Conservative government which created another role for parents: that of a consumer. The government put parents as consumers in an educational market place. Parents were to be encouraged to choose their children's school in the same way as they would choose any other commodity.

The 1988 Act also introduced into British schools a national curriculum and standardised national testing. The children of the 138 parents interviewed for the research were entering Year 1 (age 5-6 years) at the beginning of the study in September 1989 and therefore would be the first cohort to experience these new policies throughout their whole school careers. They would be the first five year olds to be taught a nationally prescribed curriculum in English, maths, and science, with other subjects being introduced progressively, and, in 1991, the first seven year olds to be assessed using nationally standardised tests and criteria. These parents were, therefore, a particularly pertinent group who were going to be involved in, through their children's experience, arguably the most radical changes in British education since 1944. A national curriculum and standardised assessment would enable them to compare schools and choose the one they regarded as being the best for their child (Parents Charter 1991). Local financial management, also introduced by the ERA, whereby a large percentage of the funding controlled by the Local Education Authorities (LEA i.e. school district) was devolved directly to the schools, and the option for schools to "opt-out" totally from LEA control and receive all their funding directly from central government, would give school governing bodies greater control over their own school development. By tying that funding to the number of children attending the school and by increasing the parents' representation on school governing bodies the balance of power would be transferred from the provider (the teachers and LEAs) to the consumer. The government advocated that this would also raise educational standards as those schools not doing so would go to the wall through lack of custom.

Methodology

The study was carried out using semi-structured interviews covering the range of issues highlighted by the ERA; the introduction of the National Curriculum, standard assessment, local management of schools, and the expansion of parental choice of schools. They also included questions about the parents' perceived role in the education of their children and their involvement with their schools. The interviews took about an hour to complete and were recorded on audio-cassettes. The parents were interviewed face to face three times; in the autumn of 1989, 1990, and 1991 and twice by telephone; once immediately after their children had experienced the national standard assessment tasks (SATs) in June 1991 and again in the summer of 1992. This final interview was to gauge their response to the written annual report which included statutory inclusions such as the child's attendance record, which was another innovation of the 1988 Act. The interviews were structured in such a way that some questions were included in the same form every year. The interviewee was told the answer s/he had given the previous year and was asked if s/he had changed her/his view. In this way self-perceived changes in attitude and opinion were recorded and reasons for change explored. During the second year of the study the parents were also asked to keep a daily diary for two weeks of any interaction they had with the school including information gleaned from their children. The interviews were carried out in the parents' own homes and the absolute confidentiality of their answers guaranteed.

The sample consisted of parents from 11 different primary schools in a single LEA in the south west of England. The schools were chosen from a larger sample of primary schools whose headteachers had been interviewed by telephone as to their perception of the impact the ERA and specifically how it was being perceived by the parents of the children attending their school. The headteachers

were also asked how they felt it might affect the parents' relationship with the school. The sample schools were chosen to give a balance of size and setting (urban/rural) and to ensure the sample parents represented the complete socioeconomic range although the intention was not to conduct a detailed analysis of responses related to class but rather to research the views of a whole spectrum of parents. The final sample of 138 parents ranged from highly paid professionals and executives, through middle management, manual and non-manual skilled workers, to unskilled workers and included some mothers who had not been in paid employment since leaving school. In most cases the interviewee was the mother but occasionally it was the father and sometimes both parents wished to be interviewed together. The interviews were carried out by two female researchers and the male director of the project all of whom were parents themselves.

Although the interviews were all recorded they were not transcribed but the tapes used to expand notes made by the researchers during the interview. The responses were analysed using a system whereby remarks made by each parent were allocated to categories that had emerged from the data itself. Each remark was noted as being individual unless it was felt that it was substantially similar to a previously noted remark in which case it was assigned to that category. This meant that for each question a long list of categories was created and issues identified. By analysing in this way the categories were able to develop from the data and not be predetermined by the researchers. The category headings therefore stuck as closely as possible to the actual words used by the interviewees. Reliability was tested by dual coding and any disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. For particularly problematic answers the tape was also used to enable the tone of voice used in the answer to clarify a specific interpretation. Using the method of coding whereby all categories for one particular question were allocated on a mentioned/not mentioned basis meant that statistical comparisons could be made of the frequency of each categorised remark. It also allowed for the fact that questions were rarely answered in a simple way as the parents clarified their own thoughts and opinions.

Parental satisfaction

The very title Education Reform Act implies that there were problems with British education that needed addressing and indeed at that time there was a substantial debate being carried out through the media about falling standards and the failure of "trendy" teaching methods (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead 1992; Turner 1990). The rhetoric surrounding the ERA invoked "parentocracy" as the way to improve those standards and free "schools and colleges to deliver the standards that employers and parents want" (Baker 1987). The study however found very little evidence of real concern amongst parents when they were first interviewed. Over 80% were satisfied, or very satisfied, with their children's schools and felt that the teachers were doing a good job. Parents were asked if they felt that standards were generally falling in schools and although they were willing to believe the stories in the media they did not feel they were borne out by their own experience. They thought standards were falling, but elsewhere in the country, or in the case of those who went to rural schools, in the inner cities. They often qualified an affirmative answer with "but not here", "but my children are making good progress" or "I have no concerns about my own children". More reservations were expressed about individual schools later in the study but these were mostly connected to specific incidents or individual teachers and not about the standard of education their children were receiving. In such cases the parents were happy if they felt the problem was being addressed by the school. The majority agreed that they would contemplate moving their children if they were not happy with the school but in fact of the 22 children who changed schools over the period of the project only 4 did so because

of dissatisfaction. Others said that their first response to any perceived problem would be to try and sort it out with the teacher or school. How a school responded to concerns appeared to be an important influencing factor on parents' feelings of satisfaction. In the school where there appeared to be most parental dissatisfaction many commented that when parents approached the headteacher because they or their child was unhappy he listened but appeared not to take them seriously. They never received any feedback about what, if any, action had been instigated. In two of the other schools where parents had had specific concerns about their child's progress they reported that when they had approached the teacher they had been listened to, the school's policy had been explained to them and the resulting action negotiated to their satisfaction. These parents still felt satisfied with the school whereas the others felt that somehow they were being marginalised.

This desire to be involved was further illustrated by three of the four sets of parents who moved their children because they were dissatisfied with the school. They all commented that they felt let down by the school because they had not been kept informed about their child's lack of progress until the child was so far behind that to move schools was their only option. Two of these parents also added that they now were much happier as the new school kept them fully informed. The fourth set of parents were in a slightly different position in that they had not wanted their son to attend the school in the first place and had expressed grave concerns about the discipline there when first interviewed. However by the time they moved him to a new school, between our second and third interviews, they seemed less sure of their dissatisfaction and the mother took pride in the fact that the old school had been sorry to see him go and had given him a "lovely report".

Parents as consumers

As the creation of the role of consumer for parents was such a major change of emphasis for education and one which was at the heart of the new legislation the parents were asked how far they saw themselves in this role. In the first year (Hughes, Wikeley and Nash 1990) a large number found it a puzzling concept to be applied to education. Although they became more familiar with the term over time it was still not a role that they took on enthusiastically.

Changes in parents' perceptions of themselves as consumers

	<u>Year 1</u> (n=137)	<u>Year 2</u> (n=128)	<u>Year 3</u> (n=124)
Very much so	12%	13%	16%
To a certain extent	34%	42%	52%
Not at all	49%	40%	29%

Some parents found that it was an idea that did not fit with their personal concept of education. *"Academic services cannot be put on a commercial level - it's a different ethos. But you can choose. You select and have a say in what your children are taught to a certain extent"* and *"I expect education to be a high standard. It's the future of the country. They should put all their resources into it"* was how two parents described their rejection of seeing themselves as consumers. However some of those who had older children who were about to transfer from primary to secondary, and therefore were involved with deciding between schools, associated it with making choices. *"If I only had one school to choose from I might not have thought of myself as a consumer but as I had a choice I did"*. *"With secondary education coming up we are shopping around trying to find the best school. It's hard to get an opinion. It's hard to work out"* Others could see how they might be consumers if they were paying for their

education; "if we had gone private, then maybe, but as we're not buying it's not appropriate", but the majority did not embrace the concept wholeheartedly even if they were becoming more conducive to it in relation to their choice of schools. *"I still feel it's a child's right but the government are turning us into consumers now. For example, if they bring in a league of results I'd be bound to look at them. The Conservatives are turning us into consumers"* was how one mother described her perception of the impact of the ERA on her.

Parental choice of school

Increased parental choice was also one of the features of the 1988 Act and in the very first interview the parents were asked why they had chosen the particular school that their child was attending. From their answers it appeared that they were more concerned with the social attributes of the school than with its academic results. This was confirmed when they were asked about what they thought made a good school. The factors mentioned most frequently were the atmosphere and ethos of the school and the relationship fostered between parents, teachers and children rather than its facilities or academic record. When asked to think ahead to the time when they would be choosing secondary schools, factors other than academic results, as given in league tables, were considered to be of equal importance. The government's publication of league tables of schools based on the results of the standardised assessments, was to give parents comparable information about school effectiveness on which to base their school choice. From this research it would seem that this is not the information that parents want. The reasons given by individuals for their choice of a particular school varied considerably but academic results were mentioned by few.

About 16% of the parents felt they had no choice of school either because for all practical reasons it was impossible to transport their child to anywhere other than their local school or because all but one of the available schools were full. A further 38% did not consider more than one school. This was usually their local school but sometimes the next nearest school. Although this might suggest that these parents chose on factors of convenience that would be an unfair assumption and an over simplification of their views. The group included those parents who had moved into a particular residential area because they wished their children to attend the local school and also those who having visited the school decided to look no further as they were satisfied with the education it offered. Very few of the parents who said that they did not consider more than one school only gave its location as the reason for that decision. They also included positive attributes of the school.

46% of the parents therefore considered more than one school. About half still chose the local school, again for reasons other than that of pure convenience. The others had chosen non-local schools, often because they were unhappy with their local school. Sometimes it was difficult to ascertain why they were unhappy. *".....the local school I wouldn't give the time of day for"*, was one cryptic comment. Local reputations could be long lived and it was not unknown for parents to choose schools, or reject them, because of their own experiences as a child. Again individuals reasons for choosing a particular school were many and varied although the majority chose for positive reasons rather than the negative qualities of schools they did not want their children to attend. Of the 138 parents however there was only one who systematically compared several schools before deciding which one she wanted her son to attend. *"School A had good facilities but seemed very conformist. All the children seemed to be doing the same thing at the same time. It seemed totally geared to middle-ability children. School B had very impressive displays but I had reservations about the head and I didn't like the school ethos. I considered School C but didn't visit as it wasn't a 5-11 school. At School D (the one finally chosen) all the children were busy, they weren't sitting*

waiting. The children were doing interesting projects - like on Marilyn Monroe and James Dean. It seemed innovative. It also had a good racial mix - most kids don't see a black face in this part of the world." As can be seen her reasons were not based on the school's academic results but again on its ethos and atmosphere.

Parents and the National Curriculum

Perhaps the most noticeable change implemented by the 1988 Act was the introduction of the National Curriculum and the accompanying standardised assessment. The parents' reaction to these changes was a major focus of the research. In England the National Curriculum is split into four key stages. Key Stage One is for five to seven year olds, Key Stage Two - seven to eleven year olds, Key Stage Three - eleven to fourteen year olds and Key Stage Four - fourteen to sixteen year olds. The parents interviewed for this research had children who were the first children ever to embark on Key Stage One in English, Maths. and Science. They were interviewed throughout Key Stage One and again as their children began Key Stage Two. By that time the Technology, History and Geography syllabi had also been implemented.

It had been assumed by the government that the introduction of a National Curriculum and assessment would be approved of by parents as ways in which they would be able to keep a check on the effectiveness of a school. In a pamphlet entitled "Your Child and the National Curriculum" produced by the Department of Education and Science in 1991 it was stated that: " *The National Curriculum guarantees that all children will be taught what they really need to know, with checks on their progress at every stage. This means that you as a parent can find out what your child is doing at school and why you, as a parent, can hold your child's school to account for the progress your child is making and for the standards of the school generally*". The study did not find overwhelming support for the National Curriculum amongst the parents and their cool response did not decrease over time. In fact parents became more likely to express concerns about its introduction as the study progressed. For example the cancellation of enjoyed events such as the school Christmas play in some schools because of the increase in the teachers workload caused by the new curriculum was particularly unpopular. Each year the parents were asked if they approved or disapproved of the National Curriculum and were they happy with its emphasis on English, maths and science.

Do parents approve or disapprove of the National Curriculum?

	Year 1 (n=136)	Year 2 (n=128)	Year 3 (n=124)
Approve	43%	44%	52%
Mixed Feelings	15%	23%	29%
Don't know enough about it	31%	19%	11%
Disapprove	6%	9%	6%
Don't know	6%	2%	2%

They did however expect their to be some benefits and these could be classified in three groups; benefits for the teachers, benefits for the children and benefits for the parents themselves. For the teachers they felt a national curriculum would give them clear guidelines to work from, which would balance out differences in training and experience. "It will be helpful for new teachers. It will help them to know that everyone has the same aims" was how one parent saw it. From the childrens' point of view they saw it as a way of increasing the fairness in the system. Children would no longer be subjected to the idiosyncrasies of a particular teacher or school and would not waste time repeating work they had already done.

Those who felt it likely that their children would need to change schools because of family circumstances also felt it would make that easier by preventing the repetition or omission of a particular curriculum area and ensure progression continued smoothly. *"It will give everyone a fair chance", and "if they move their education can just carry on - they won't slip back but just slot in"* were two typical comments. For themselves the greatest benefit that the parents saw was that they would know what their children were supposed to be covering, whether the child was making adequate progress and how they could help if needed. *"Parents will know more about children's progression and become more involved"* was a typical answer.

Their major concerns were that it would become too restrictive. They wanted spontaneity, creativity and fun in the education of their young children. *"I worry whether it's too rigid, especially with infants. If they're channelled too much it will detract from what they're doing - like their writing. They'd lose the creativity."* was one parent's concern. As mentioned above they were also concerned that there might be too much to fit into the school day. They were aware that a number of new subjects had been introduced, for example much had been made of the introduction of science for infants, but were concerned that nothing had been removed to create more time. They also expressed concern that it was all being introduced too fast and that the teachers were unable to cope with so much change at once. They were very aware of the increased workload on the teaching staff and some felt that insufficient resources had been made available to ensure its smooth implementation. This awareness of the stress the changes were putting on the teachers is something that was also apparent when the parents were asked about assessment and will be discussed further in the section below. A few parents also expressed concern about the possibility of a national curriculum being subject to political manipulation. *"I've still got mixed feelings It could be useful but capable of political manipulation. They're trying to traditionalise things. The National Curriculum is giving politicians a handle on education, taking it away from educationalists"* was a comment made in the second year's interview by a father who was a lay preacher and youth worker. A similar concern was expressed by another parent when asked about falling standards in schools. *"It's been very one-sided publicity. It causes a lot of anxiety in parents. It's so negative I wonder if it's been rigged. They don't give a proper balance. You don't hear the children's point of view. It all fits in with the policy they want to push through. I feel as if I'm being manipulated"*.

However despite their doubts about the National Curriculum as a whole the parents liked the idea of English, maths and science forming the core curriculum. In all three years 60% answered positively to the question "do you think English, maths and science are the most important aspects of the curriculum?" with a further 20 -25% agreeing with the proviso that they were not the only important subjects. 16% in the first year had doubts about the importance of science and although that dropped to 12% in the third year it should perhaps be seen as critical minority. It was the most obvious innovation and the subject about which parents felt they knew the least. Science in the past had been mostly nature study for this age group and parents found it hard to visualise what else it could involve for five year olds. Their own experience of science was at secondary school level and as one father put it *"English and maths come before any Bunsen burners"*. However the children proved to be their greatest source of knowledge and many parents commented on how much the children enjoyed science. Although they had some reservations about the size of the curriculum as a whole the parents wanted their children to receive a wide ranging education and that they should enjoy learning without being put under too much pressure. *"I know they are important ingredients but I do think there should be much more emphasis on creative activities, like music and painting. You see so little enjoyment even in*

infant schools - there's all that pressure now to get a tick. There's so much to be learned that hasn't been acknowledged. A sense of self - putting yourself across in a way. They're only using one part of the brain with this curriculum."

In the final round of interviews it seemed appropriate to ask the parents about Key Stage Two on which their children were just embarking. They had had two years to become accustomed to the existence of a national curriculum so they were asked how much they felt they knew about this next stage. Very few parents felt they knew very much or even that they had been told that their children were now in Key Stage Two. 96% said they would like to know more and the consensus of opinion appeared to be that this information should come from the school. As with Key Stage One they wanted to know what their children's learning would involve so that they would be able to help their child if the need arose. When asked what subjects they would like to see included in Key Stage Two many felt that an opportunity had been lost by the lack of inclusion of a foreign language.

Parents and Assessment

The parents' attitude to national assessment interestingly became more hostile over time. This assessment was done through a combination of teacher assessment in the spring term of 1992 and standard assessment tasks carried out in the summer term of that year. These involved the children working either in small groups or individually with the teacher and proved to be administratively quite difficult for some schools. Though their children had not been especially distressed by tests, as had been predicted by the press, by the end of the study the parents were expressing grave concerns about the methods of assessment and the validity of the results at this age (some children were not yet seven whilst others were nearly eight when the assessment tasks were administered). They also had some concern about the amount of teaching time lost during the administration of the SATs as well as the pressure it put on the teachers. *"It took up a lot of preparation. The teachers looked exceedingly tired. It put an awful lot of pressure on them"*, or as one mother expressed it *"at the end of the SATs, the teacher looked as if she could do with several large gins"*.

During the first two interviews most parents (51%) had been positive about the idea of assessment as they felt it would give them more information about their children's progress even though very few felt they knew how it was going to be carried out and in some cases even if their child was to be involved. *"If there are problems we'll know before too late, we can give more help"* was a typical comment. By 1992 however many parents had changed their opinion. They felt that the assessment had taken too long and the SATs had disrupted the class by exerting too much pressure on the teacher without telling them any more than they knew already. Over 66% of the parents felt that the term "level 1, 2 or 3", told them very little they did not already know about their child's progress in English, maths or science. *"I don't think it's really necessary at that age. Teachers know what each child is capable of. They know who needs help anyway"*. In the telephone interviews conducted immediately after the SATs the parents had been asked what levels they expected their children to reach and in the majority of cases their answers matched closely the actual results. Where discrepancies did exist parents were as likely to be underestimate their children's abilities as overestimate them. Contrary to the belief of many of the teachers and headteachers spoken to during the study, parents did not often have inflated views of their children's abilities.

Children's "actual" and "expected" results

	Year 3		
	English (n=97)	Maths (n=96)	Science (n=92)
Did better than expected	22%	9%	24%
Did same as expected	65%	75%	68%
Did worse than expected	13%	16%	8%

The parents' hope that the assessments would give them more detailed information as to how their child was progressing and the teachers would be able to identify how they could give help if needed had proved to be unfulfilled. By the end of the assessment and reporting stages over two thirds of the parents were saying that they had learned nothing new. They had wanted to know about their child's strengths and weaknesses so that they could provided help at home whenever necessary. The national standardised assessment procedures had not given them this and it is therefore not surprising that they were significantly more negative about assessment at the end of the study than they had been at the beginning.

They were also asked in Year 3 about the publication of results as the introduction of "league tables" is a crucial part of the current reforms. It was a difficult question for parents to answer as the first such tables had yet to be published when the final round of interviews was carried out so it was still to some extent a hypothetical question. However just under half felt that it could be a good idea for present parents as well as prospective ones. *"It's a good idea. If the results are bad, you can't change your choice, but you can put pressure on the school to find out why"* and others felt it could be useful for new parents needing to choose a school for the first time. About a third of the parents disapproved of the publication of such results. Some were concerned about their validity; *"I must admit I thought the assessment results would give me more information than they did. Schools are going to turn out so many average children, it will be difficult to see much between them in terms of quality of education"*. Others had more ethical objections. They were concerned about small schools where it might be possible to identify one particular child or to blame the school's poor results on one individual. Those with mixed feelings felt that "league tables" purely of assessment results would not tell the whole story. *"They should also give information about the background of the school and the children..."*. In interview three the parents were also asked about using 'league tables' of secondary school results when deciding which school to choose. Most admitted that they would look at league tables if presented with them but were keen to point out that they would be equally interested in other factors such as where their child would be happiest, what the school had to offer and the opinions they formed themselves by visiting or talking to children they knew who already attended.

Conclusions

There are two aspects of these findings of educational importance. Firstly there is the relevance to the policy makers. Introducing change in name of parents without first researching parental opinion could be seen to be foolhardy if not undemocratic. Several parents in the study expressed the feeling that they had about being manipulated by politicians, or being forced to behave in such a way that was at odds with their own philosophy of education. An interesting anomaly in the system is that at the same time as giving state schools the financial freedom and encouragement to be accountable to local parental demands a national curriculum was introduced that dictates what children should be taught, thus restricting one aspect of their responsiveness. It is also interesting to note that

although one aim of the legislation appeared to be to make state schools more like those in the private sector these schools have been explicitly excluded from being required to follow the national curriculum. In Scotland where parents and teachers seem to work together more closely the introduction of the SATs was delayed because many parents withdrew their children from school rather than allow them to undergo the assessment. Although there was strong sympathy for the teachers amongst the parents in this study it did not extend as far as the majority being willing to support a boycott. Those who said they would have been willing often added that they trusted the teachers' professional judgment and if they had felt it necessary then they (the parents) would have gone along with their decision. Interestingly this actually happened in 1993 when most English secondary schools were able to boycott the implementation of the Key Stage 3 tests because their professional concern about their efficacy was supported by the parents. The government also felt it necessary to conduct a review of the National Curriculum and in his report Sir Ron Dearing (Dearing 1994) suggests substantial reductions in the amount and time prescribed for each subject. Unpopular legislation, however closely related to the ethos of a democratically elected government, can be disrupted or defeated by groundswell opinion.

Another aspect of the findings of the research is the parents' concern with fairness. They were initially positive about a national curriculum because they felt it would iron out some of the inequalities in the education system. When asked about written tests for seven year olds (Hughes, Wikeley, Nash 1994) many parents who felt they would be no problem for their own child were concerned that it would not take into account the wide variety in abilities of reading and writing to be found at that age. "League tables" it was felt by some parents could give a distorted view of schools by not taking into account the social and academic backgrounds of their intake. Another aspect of the 1988 Education Act has been the introduction of grant maintained (GM) schools. These schools can 'opt out' of local education authority control. They receive their funding direct from central government including the amount that was considered to be what their LEA would have spent on them in providing central services. This means that the amount left to provide for those schools not 'opting out' becomes smaller. To apply for grant maintained status a school has to hold a ballot of parents which proves supportive of the move by a simple majority. Again it is interesting to note that the number of schools 'opting out' has fallen well short of the government target and in the last year only 160 schools out of a possible 23,000 have held parental ballots and of these 40% have voted no. GM status is not proving to be an attractive carrot even when schools obviously materially benefit from such a move. Parents are voting to stay within a local government system which perhaps they see as being fairer.

There are also important implications for schools from this research. The findings have an important message for schools for improving their relationship with parents. Accountability, in some quarters, has become to be suspected of being the wielding of power by a specific group, in this case parents, and a diminishing of any regard for the teachers' professionalism. However this is not necessarily the view of the parents. *"We must keep an eye on what is going on but I regret the passing of trust between parent and teacher"* was the comment of one parent. This research suggests that if teachers could be more willing to explain what they are doing and why, to have confidence in their own professionalism by showing a willingness to be open to constructive criticism then accountability could be a binding force to cement parents and teachers in a partnership that is valued by both. *"I went to a 'reading evening' at the school designed to explain the different methods of teaching reading and defending the recent press attacks on poor standards. Having been extremely critical I now accept that this school at least knows a little more about the complexities than I do."*

- *It was very worthwhile*" was what one father wrote in the diary we asked him to complete in the second year of the study. This research shows that parents want to trust teachers and to work with them to the benefit of their own individual child. *"I'd like to know generally more on what she's covering, but not too far ahead. Maybe if they told us a term ahead what she's going to do and how we could help at home - although I can't see the teachers doing that as some parents might coach their children or put them under pressure. Or tell us about things we could offer. I get no feedback from the school when I send in things for projects"*. They also want teachers to trust them and to be willing to incorporate parents' views into their thinking or at least discuss alternative views indicating that parents' opinions are valid and valued. *"We feel we should do more, but they also regard it as us and them"*, and *"it's good if they use it. (parents views) Home life can affect how they learn and how they fit in with others. But they do need to use it if they ask for it. If they want you to work with them, they have to work with you. If they ask you for information they should use it. They keep telling you they're individuals but this doesn't tally with their actions"* were comments made by two parents.

There was no indication that these parents' attitudes to their children's education had been dramatically changed by the implementation of the Education Reform Act. They were deeply interested in it at the beginning of the study and continued to be so at the end. However there is a need for further research as the parents become more used to their central role and to the form of information these new procedures give them. As one parent described it, when asked at the end of the research period about whether the involvement in the study had affected their relationship with their children's school, *"because the National Curriculum was imposed I am glad there is the opportunity to find out what is the opinion of parents. They are rarely asked. No political body has ever asked us if we wanted what they've done."* How their long term relationship with their children's schools is affected by these changes remains to be seen.

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